

**An Archaeological Survey  
of the  
Mission Del Rio Development  
Bexar County, Texas**

**by**

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**Submitted to**

**Odyssey Residential Construction  
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## ABSTRACT

Abasolo Archaeological Consultants carried out a cultural resource assessment of 9.6 acres of the Mission Del Rio Development for Odyssey Residential Construction of Dallas, Texas and the City of San Antonio. The property is located at the intersection of VFW Boulevard (E. White Avenue) and Riverside Drive. Fieldwork was done in late January 2005 and consisted of a 100% surface inspection and the excavation of nine backhoe trenches to search for potential buried archaeological sites. The foundations of five 20<sup>th</sup> century structures were recorded, including a buried plaster floor of a burned structure. Evidence of prehistoric occupation was found in one location. None of the prehistoric or historic sites are eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

## INTRODUCTION

In January, 2005, Abasolo Archaeological Consultants (AAC) conducted a cultural resource assessment of 9.6 acres in the Mission Del Rio Development for Odyssey Residential Construction of Dallas, Texas and the City of San Antonio. The property lies on the east side of the San Antonio River, about three miles south of downtown, at the intersection of E. White Avenue (also known as VFW Boulevard) and Riverside Drive. This area is part of the San Antonio Mission District. Indeed, the bell tower of Mission San Jose can be seen just over a half-mile to west-southwest.

The property that was surveyed is divided into two tracts. For the purposes of the present report, we refer to the two parcels as follows: the South Tract, south of VFW Boulevard consisting of approximately four acres, and the North Tract, north of VFW Boulevard consisting of nearly six acres. The two tracts lie between Riverside Drive and the San Antonio River.

The area along the river has been heavily impacted by flood-control channelization of the river carried out in recent decades. The river channel was straightened, the banks and natural contours were heavily modified, and all original vegetation was removed.

Indeed, the modification of the terrain resulting from channelization and subsequent deposits of fill in the area has obscured the extent of the original floodplain and adjacent terraces. A review of the soils in the area helps to distinguish between these two segments of the terrain (Taylor et al. 1991).

The soils within the project are classified into related groups: Venus clay loam (1 to 3 percent slopes) and Frio clay loam. Venus clay loam occurs between terraces and the floodplain. In the project area, these soils were recorded along the eastern half bordering Riverside Drive. The surface layer is about 14 inches (35 cm) thick and the subsurface layer is about 20 inches (51 cm) thick. Landscaping, construction, and channel improvements have removed much of the Venus soils from the project area. Frio clay loam occurs on the San Antonio River floodplain and has a thickness of about 40 inches (102 cm). It is mapped on the western half of the properties bordering the river.

## THE INVESTIGATIONS

Since the Mission Del Rio Development is within the San Antonio Mission District, it was of some concern that cultural resources dating to the Spanish Colonial era might be present. Additionally, the Texas Archeological Site Atlas (Texas Historical Commission) indicated that site 41BX237, the Hot Wells Hotel Site, included a portion of the south tract. Therefore, a thorough field and archival investigation was warranted.

The fieldwork was accomplished January 24-27, and January 31, 2005 by the authors. The assessment was carried out in accordance with the "Archaeological Survey Standards for Texas" (Texas Historical Commission) in order to locate prehistoric and historic sites and assess their eligibility for nomination to National Register of Historic Places. The assessment consisted of a 100% surface inspection and nine backhoe trenches excavated to inspect for buried archeological sites. Several 20<sup>th</sup> concrete foundations were evident on the property and these features were located on the plan map (Fig. 9). A "no collection" policy was followed during the survey and testing. The one diagnostic artifact encountered was drawn and photographed for documentation.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The San Antonio River, south of downtown San Antonio, is best known for the four 18<sup>th</sup> century Spanish missions that are now part of the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park. The missions, and features linked to the missions (such as acequias, gristmills and dams), have received a great deal of archaeological attention (Fox 1999).

Additionally, the expansion of 19<sup>th</sup> century San Antonio saw the rise of neighborhoods around the missions and adjacent to the river corridor. Eventually, the construction of railroads, industrial areas, and other facets of urban growth, extensively modified the original landscape. In recent decades, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the San Antonio River Authority carried out a channelization of this section of the San Antonio River. To enhance flood control, the river channel was straightened and the adjacent terrain was heavily modified and stripped of vegetation.

Prehistoric sites were damaged or eliminated by development and river modification, and very little is known about such sites along the river south of downtown. Based on archaeological research in the general region (e.g. Hester 2004), one could predict that the remnants of 11,500 years of human occupation would be found along the river and adjacent terraces. The earliest human presence was likely in the Paleoindian period, 11,500-8,800 years ago. Indicators of such occupation would be spear points of distinctive style and date, such as Clovis, Folsom, Golondrina, and Angostura (Turner and Hester 1993:50 ff.). In the following Archaic period (8,800-1,500 years ago, the Native American population greatly expanded, and their sites are often found on terraces overlooking local streams. Use of limestone rock for cooking and for earth-oven techniques often result in major accumulations of fire-cracked rock fragments. Although "burned rock middens" typical of northern Bexar County have dropped out of the archaeological record in the present project area, it would be expected that sites from the long-lived Archaic would be indicated by burned rock fragments, diagnostic spear points and tools used in word-working or other tasks, and the flake debris resulting from tool-making (Turner and Hester 1993:50 ff.). The Late Prehistoric period (A.D. 500-1700) is most clearly indicated by the occurrence of tiny arrow points, indicating the introduction of the bow and arrow into the area around A.D. 500-700. Later in this period, around A.D. 1250-1700, there was a regional emphasis on bison-hunting, and the material culture from this era are notable for the presence of pottery and other distinctive artifacts (Hester 2004).

With the establishment of the Spanish Colonial missions early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the arrival of Lipan Apache raiding parties by the 1720s, the Native American populations were greatly modified. Those who went into the San Antonio missions, where they were joined by groups from south Texas and northeast Mexico, continued their distinctive bone-tempered pottery, along with stone-tool making, throughout the Spanish Colonial period. These Native Americans would still have used the San Antonio River for hunting and fishing, for plant food gathering, and for short-term occupations. It is likely that established Late Prehistoric campsites along this part of the river would have been reoccupied at different times after Historic contact. Given the proximity of Mission San Jose to the west, and Mission San Juan Capistrano to the south, there well could be Historic Native American remains, likely dating to the 1700s, in the project area.

Nearby recorded archaeological sites include Mission San Jose (41BX3), and a handful of sites on the west side of the river. These include 41BX267 (a Colonial irrigation ditch), 41BX 266, the San Juan dam dating from 1730, and 41BX270, another site of Spanish Colonial age in the Mission Parkway area. The only recorded archaeological site that was shown to extend into the Mission del Rio project area is 41BX237, the Hot Wells Hotel Site. The topographic map plotting of this site includes part of the South Tract, as shown on the Texas Archeological Site Atlas.

The Hot Wells locality has been studied by Fox and Highley (1985). In 1892, a well was drilled in the area of the present San Antonio State Hospital. It went to a depth of 1750 Feet, and produced an artesian well characterized by a sulphur odor and a water temperature of 103 degrees. By 1894, the well was being used for the "Hot Sulphur Baths." In addition to a bath house, artificial lake, a fountain, and other embellishments, the owner also imported exotic animals, including a beer-drinking bear. However, the bath house burned in late 1894 and was not rebuilt.

In 1900, the land changed ownership and a 190-room, 3-story hotel was built in 1902. The Hot Wells Hotel later added an ornate bath house, driveways, gardens, landscaping, and other modifications of the landscape. The Hotel, Bath House, and its camps drew large numbers of visitors, including the wealthy elite and pre-World War I movie stars. Baseball fields were built, an alligator farm was planned, and ostrich races were held for the entertainment of Hot Wells guests. The popularity of the Hot Wells complex had waned by World War I, and in the early 1920s, it became a school. The hotel burned in 1925. A variety of property uses followed after the burning, especially a motel and trailer park, and a short-lived restaurant in the Bath House, which had not burned. The structural remains of both the hotel and the bath house can still be seen today.

In their archaeological and historical study, Fox and Highley (1985:38) recommended that areas to the north and south of the hotel ground be surveyed if future development was contemplated. This includes the South Tract of the Mission del Rio Project. They noted the "lack of accurate maps" (*ibid.*) and a somewhat generalized plotting of the site area were recorded.

With the known archaeological background, the survey by AAC had to consider the potential for the occurrence of both prehistoric and early historic (Spanish Colonial to ca. 1870) sites. Furthermore, it was necessary to determine whether any notable remains from the Hot Wells site actually extended into the South Tract.

## SURVEY RESULTS

As we noted above, a 100% pedestrian survey was carried out on the Mission del Rio property. Five historic features were observed during the course of this survey. These historic features are described later. In addition, nine backhoe trenches were excavated to explore for buried cultural deposits. Toward that goal, all except BHT 8 and 9 were negative. Recent landfill debris and garbage was encountered in BHT 1 and 5. The results of the backhoe testing are provided below.

### Backhoe Trench Testing

Nine backhoe trenches (BHT) were excavated to test for buried archaeological deposits (Fig. 2). No intact buried cultural deposits dating prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century were encountered. Modern trash deposits were exposed in BHT 1 and 5, and a trace of prehistoric cultural material was noted in BHT 9. The plaster floor of a historic (post 1900) structure that burned (Historic Feature 5) was recorded in BHT 8.

In the brief descriptions that follow, soil colors are based on standards provided in the Munsell Color Chart (e.g., yellow 10YR 7/6, yellow dark grayish brown 2.5YR 3/2, etc.). Backhoe trenches 1-5 were oriented roughly northwest-southeast, BHT 7 and 8, north-south, and BHT 9, east-west.

**BHT 1:** This trench located at the southern end of the South Tract (Fig 1). It was excavated to a depth of 1.1 meters and was three meters long. It was located just north of a geophysical bore hole). The deposits consisted of stratified layers of mixed clay/gravel overlying a layer of clay. Beneath the clay is a modern trash dump of construction materials, plastic, wires, roofing materials, and other debris that extended below the 1.1 meter depth. The contents of the trench were recorded and it was immediately backfilled.

**BHT 2:** This trench ( Figs. 1, 3) was placed just north of a large concrete foundation (Historic Feature 1) in the approximate center of the South Tract. It was excavated to a depth of one meter and was five meters long. It consisted of an upper stratified layering of fill from different sources put down during river channelization work. Underlying the channelization fill at 82 cm below surface is a dark floodplain soil consistent with the Frio soils along the San Antonio River floodplain. The stratigraphy of the trench wall was recorded as follows:

0-60 cm:	mixed clay/gravel; yellow 10YR 7/6; glass shards, flowerpot sherds
60-75 cm:	clean gravel fill
75-82 cm:	white marl zone with gravels; white 5YR 8/1
82-95 cm:	dark soil/floodplain very dark grayish brown 2.5YR 3/2

**BHT 3:** This trench was at the north portion of the South Tract near VFW Boulevard (Figs. 1, 4). It was 1.3 meters deep and four meters long. Like BHT 2, the upper 70 cm of fill was deposited during or after river channelization.. Undisturbed floodplain soils were encountered at 70 cm. No cultural material of any kind was observed in the test. The profile deposits were recorded as follows:

0-35 cm:	mixed clay and gravel
35-45 cm:	mixed black soil

45-70 cm:	mixed clay/gravel
70-100+ cm:	undisturbed terrace/floodplain ( Frio Series) dusky red 2.5YR 3/2

**BHT 4:** This trench (Figs. 1, 5) was located west of Riverside Drive and north of VFW Boulevard in the North Tract. It was five meters long and 2 meters deep. The trench was placed at the highest elevation of what appeared to be the remnant of the first terrace above the floodplain and near the foundation ruins of a 20<sup>th</sup> century structure (Historic Feature 3). The deposits consisted entirely of terrace sandy loams of the Patrick series soils. No cultural material of any kind was encountered in the test excavation. The trench profile was recorded as follows:

0-30 cm.:	upper soil; dark brown sandy clay loam, dark brown 7.5YR 4/2
30-50 cm:	pea gravel; 20% at top
50-70 cm:	sandy clam loam; 80% pea gravel
70 to 200 cm+:	yellowish sandy clay loam; 90% gravel, becoming more dense and larger down to 2 m, grading to a tight clay, pale brown in color, at bottom. At 70+ cm: very pale brown 10YR 7/4-7/5

**BHT 5:** Also located in the North Tract, this trench (Fig. 1) was positioned near a drainage that transects the North Tract property. A large concrete slab (Historic Feature 4) is east of the trench. The entire fill was recent and capped a garbage dump containing used tires.. The dump was encountered at 75 cm and the trench was abandoned. No profile was made due to the fact that the entire deposit was the result of landfill activities over the past 30 years.

**BHT 6:** This trench in the North Tract was placed south of BHT 5 on a low east-west ridge or terrace remnant (Fig. 1). It was five meters long oriented and excavated to a depth of 1.7 meters. Our suspicions were that the “ridge” was indeed part of the terrace was confirmed by a dense gravel deposit encountered at ca. 85 cm below the surface. No cultural material was detected in the trench excavations. The trench profile is as follows:

0-35 cm:	gray gravelly fill
35-85 cm:	<i>in situ</i> matrix; tight clay, 5-10% gravel; dark brown 10YR 3/2
85-170 cm:	<i>in situ</i> gravel, rounded “cannon-ball/grapeshot” size and shape, grading to hematite nodules and chert: very pale brown 10YR 7/4-7/5

**BHT 7:** This trench (Fig. 6) was located within a grove of three pecans trees in the north part of the North Tract property, south of a row of houses on Heritage Street (Fig. 1). The possible remnants of a stone foundation (Historic Feature 5) are about 30 meters north of the trench. The trench was about five meters long and reached a depth of over one meter. The fill was similar to that encountered in BHT 4. The soil profile conforms to the Patrick soils that occur in parts of the broad Venus soils found along San Antonio River terraces. No cultural materials were observed in the test. The trench profile is as follows:



0-43 cm:	tight silty loam
43-75 cm:	tight silty loam mixed with caliche; mottled
75-90 cm:	caliche and pea gravel (see. BHT 4)
100 cm and below:	yellow gravels

**BHT 8:** A rectangular concentration of uncut limestone cobbles covering an area of approximately six meters by four meters was noted in a cluster of three pecan trees at the north end of the north tract. To explore this feature, a shallow backhoe trench was placed at the southeast corner. The trench was approximately six meters long and 50 cm deep. The trench exposed a burned caliche/gravel floor 20 cm below the surface (Fig. 7). The floor was 15 cm thick and capped with a layer of ashy, melted glass, a round iron nail, window pane shards, and burned commercially produced ceramic tiles. The function of the structure is unknown, and may have been either a domestic or a commercial structure.

**BHT 9:** This east-west trench was placed at the northwestern portion of the north northern end of property, nearer to the river (Figs. 1, 8). The trench was five meters long and 1.5 meters deep. The soils are Frio clay loam, the dominant soil type on the San Antonio River floodplain. Occasional burned rock was noted in the upper 30 cm of the profile. Several small fragments of burned limestone, two flakes, and a heavily utilized *Guadalupe* tool or adze was observed (Fig. 13). The cultural material was not buried in sealed deposits and did not appear to have good contextual integrity. Indeed, these items may have accumulated on an old surface at or near the bottom of a plow zone. The presence of burned rock and a stone artifact merits formal site designation, and it is temporarily designated as Site 1 in the survey in order to document the presence of prehistoric cultural material at this locality. A formal site report will be submitted to the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory. The profile description is as follows:

0-30 cm:	rich brown loam; plow zone, w/ cultural material accumulated at 30 cm including scattered, very small burned rock; one spent <i>Guadalupe</i> tool or adze
30-60 cm	gravel "stringers," with less sand and finer clay at 50-60 cm 10YR 3/2 at 50 cm, grading to 10YR 4/2
60-90 cm	clay 10 YR 5/3
90+ cm	clay/floodplain 10YR 6/4

## Historic Features

No historic structures were left standing on either the North or South Tracts. There was clear evidence, however, that several structures had once been present (Fig. 9). In an attempt to determine more about these structures, the historic Sanborn Fire Insurance maps from 1894 to 1950 were consulted at the San Antonio Public Library by the senior author. City Archaeologist Kay Hindes also examined the Sanborn maps on file at the City of San Antonio. Unfortunately, the relevant maps stop at Riverside Drive and do not record the structures between Riverside Drive and the San Antonio River.

Five historic features were documented within the project area. All are 20<sup>th</sup> century foundations of structures probably removed in conjunction with channelization or when property was purchase by previous owners. Each is listed below and the locations are shown in Figure .

Historic Feature 1 (Fig. 10): This feature was the reinforced concrete foundations to a multiple room structure with a possible basement located near the center of the south tract. A



standing structure is visible at this locality on the aerial photos found in the *Soil Survey of Bexar County* (Taylor et al., 1991).

Historic Feature 2: An asphalt pavement and a rectangular brick and concrete subterranean structure were the notable traces at Feature 2 located adjacent to VFW Boulevard at the north end of the tract.

Historic Feature 3 (Fig. 11): This foundation is located facing Riverside Drive north of VFW Boulevard. Associated with the foundation are several upright supports, possibly for a fuel tank (Figure 2). There also is evidence of a subterranean tank. We presume this foundation was part of a service station.

Historic Feature 4: A reinforced slab ca. 4 meters wide and 17 meters long is northwest of Feature 3. Possibly associated with this is a subterranean feature represented by a hole near the northeast corner nearly a meter across. This subterranean feature at first glance appears to be a cistern but lacks evidence of brickwork or a formal opening. It is currently partly covered by sheets of steel.

Historic Feature 5 (Fig. 12): A concentration of uncut cobbles alerted us to this feature. It is a burned caliche/gravel floor 20 cm beneath the surface and capped by a layer of ashy matrix and recent trash. The floor was exposed in BHT 8 and is 15 cm thick. Approximately two meters of the floor was exposed in the trench profile. In addition, a 1 x 1 meter square test pit was hand excavated and the fill screened through a one-quarter inch mesh to recover artifacts to date the structure. Artifacts observed at the time of the testing and recovered in the test pit included burned glass, glass pane shards, a round nail, and numerous carbon rods to small batteries, beer bottle sherds, and burned pieces of commercially-made roof tiles. It was not possible to estimate the size of the structure from the limited exposure of the tests. The artifacts associated with the structure indicate a late 20<sup>th</sup> century date. It is our interpretation that this feature represents a burned residence or place of business that was at least partially tile roofed. No further work is recommended.

### **Prehistoric Archaeological Site**

The deposit of prehistoric cultural material recorded in BHT 9 deserves formal site designation. A more detailed description of the site is provided below.

Site 1. A thin prehistoric artifact scatter observed in BHT 9 (Figs. 1, 9) is given a site designation to document its presence within the landscape of the development and Mission District. It consists of burned limestone rock fragments, an occasional chipped stone flake, and a spent *Guadalupe Biface* (Fig. 13) (Turner and Hester 1993:256-257). The cultural material was confined to the upper 30 cm of the surface which appears to be considerably disturbed (a probable plow zone), and it did not appear in the exposed profile as a sealed buried deposit. The floodplain begins to slope upward slightly northward in this section of the property, dropping off to recently landscaped floodplain to the south. The horizontal extent of the cultural deposit is unknown. It was not encountered in BHT 7 to the southeast. It is our assessment that the site probably extends northward beyond the property where the floodplain again meets the terrace slope. The deposit is dated at least to the Early Archaic period (3500 B.C. or earlier) based on the presence of the *Guadalupe Biface*.

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A cultural resource assessment at the proposed Mission del Rio property was carried out in late January, 2005. The fieldwork included a 100% surface survey, enhanced by the excavation of nine backhoe trenches to evaluate subsurface deposits. The survey recorded five 20<sup>th</sup> century features. Backhoe Trench 9 led to the discovery of scattered prehistoric materials and this locality was designated as Site 1. The five historic features, along with prehistoric Site 1, are not of sufficient importance to warrant nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

Furthermore, there is no evidence of Spanish Colonial or early 19<sup>th</sup> century utilization of the project area. The wholesale disturbance related to the channelization of the San Antonio River would likely have eliminated such evidence if it was ever present. There was no evidence that any architectural elements of the Hot Wells Hotel site (41BX237) are present on the South Tract. It is recommended that the site area be redrawn on the Texas Archeological Site Atlas to correct the present plotting.

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## Figures



Figure 1. Aerial view of Mission Del Rio development showing the location of backhoe trenches (aerial photo provided by Carter Burgess, Inc).





Figure 2. Backhoe testing of BHT 4 in progress.



Figure 3. Backhoe Trench 2 showing layers of recent fill over dark floodplain deposit.





Figure 4. Backhoe Trench 3 showing layers of recent fill over dark floodplain deposit.



Figure 5. Backhoe Trench 4 showing terrace gravel deposits.





Figure 8. Backhoe Trench 9 profile. Prehistoric cultural material was observed in the upper 30 cm of the deposit.



Figure 9. Map showing location of historic features 1-5 and archaeological site 1(aerial photo provided by Carter Burgess, Inc).





Figure 10. Concrete platform and brick feature at Historic Feature 1.



Figure 11. Upright concrete supports at Historic Feature 3, possibly for storage tanks





Figure 12. Concentration of uncut limestone cobbles at Historic Feature 5; a burned caliche/gravel floor was discovered beneath this concentration.

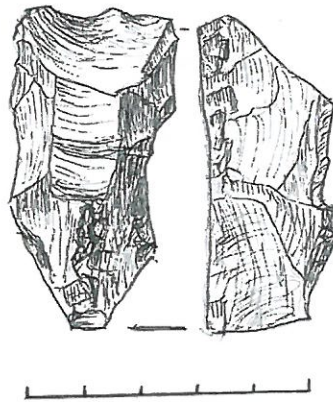


Figure 13. Spent Guadalupe adze recovered from BHT 9.